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ABSTRACT

The first phase of an ongoing study of communication in a naturalistic situation in which children talked to familiar children is described in this paper. The situation was one that encouraged pretend (or dramatic) play. Research was focused on (1) the amount of pretend play: (2) the amount of speech used for planning or managing the play: and (3) the amount of speech used for role enactment. Children observed were 20 boys (mean age 47 months) and 26 girls (mean age 48 months) who were enrolled in a preschool program at the University of Connecticut and who came primarily from educated, upper-middle class families. Compatible dyads were formed of same-sex children who were born within 4 months of one another and who were from the same preschool class. Dyads were taken to a play room by a familiar adult. They were told that they had a long time to play and that the teacher would come back to take them to their classroom. Play sessions were videotaped from the next room. Each dyad was analyzed by two coders. Observations revealed that even quite young children had begun to acquire the communicative abilities that allow them to vary their choice of utterances depending on the sex, status, and social intent of the role being protrayed, and do so spontaneously in their dyadic play. (Author/RH)

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COMMUNICATION IN PRETEND PLAY

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Abstract

It is intuitively appealing to suppose that social pretend play (or dramatic play) is beneficial for young children's development, yet our knowledge about pretending is as yet quite limited. Spontaneous play in 2- to 5-year old same-sex dyads was observed. Analyzing the sequences for pretend play, it was asked: How much did the children engage in pretend play? How did they allocate their linguistic resources within a pretend play sequence to manage the play and carry out the roles? How did they mark their speech in order to make it identifiable as being in a role? How do younger and older children differ in their pretending? Observations revealed that even quite young children have begun to acquire the communicative abilities that allow them to vary their choice of utterances depending on the sex, status, and social intent of the role being portrayed, and do so spontaneously in their dyadic play. A better understanding of the amount and type of pretending carried out by preschoolers is fundamental to the important issue of the possible effect of pretending on cognitive and social development, and to decisions regarding the structuring of preschool programs to encourage optimal development.

Psychological research traditionally has focused on the inability of the child to function as a social being. Difficulties in role-playing and ineptness in conversational skills were seen as two reflections of the child's egocentrism (Piaget, 1970). In contrast, recent studies of the development of communicative competence have stressed the child's social nature (Garvey & Hogan, 1973) and emerging conversational skills. For example, even toddlers are remarkably successful at communicating with one another (e.g., Mueller, 1972; Mueller & Brenner, 1977). Young children adapt their speech to the listener to some extent (Sachs & Devin, 1976; Shatz & Gelman, 1973). They can also carry out certain types of roles when instructed to do so (Andersen, 1977; Sachs & Devin, 1973). Their spontaneous pretend play can be sustained and cooperative, using verbal and nonverbal communication to plan and manage the play and to coordinate their play activities (Garvey, 1977; Garvey & Berndt, 1977; Garvey, in press; Gearhart, 1979). All of these studies, and many others making similar points, have led us to appreciate the capacity of the child to function successfully as a communicator.

Nevertheless, there are changes in the child's communicative effectiveness with age, and the goal of the study to be reported today is to investigate developmental changes in communication between the ages of 2 and 6. This paper will describe the first phase of an ongoing study of communication in a naturalistic situation, with children talking to familiar children. Furthermore, the situation is one that encouraged pretend (or dramatic) play, since such play is not only a common child behavior but one that is unique to the child's social world. The focus here is on the amount of pretend play in the sessions and, for the pretending sequences, the amount of speech that functioned for planning or managing the play and the amount that was used for actual role enactment.

Method

Subjects. The children observed were 20 boys between 26 and 61 months (mean age 47 months) and 26 girls between 24 and 64 months (mean age 48 months). The children were enrolled in a preschool program at the University of Connecticut, and primarily from educated, upper-middle class families. Dyads were formed of same-sex children within 4 months of age, from the same preschool class. The pairings were screened for incompatibility by a teacher.

Three boy dyads started play sessions but were not used in the study. In two cases, the sessions were stopped because of aggressive behavior and in one case the data were not used because the boys discovered that they could look through the one-way mirror into the filming room. One dyad of two-year-old girls was not used because the children were afraid to stay in the room without an adult.

Procedure. In a balanced order, the dyads were taken to a play-room by a familiar adult. They were told that they had a long time to play, and that the teacher would come back to take them to their classroom.

The play-room was a small room furnished with two couches, low tables, and a lamp, with a one-way mirror on one wall. Play objects were arranged on the couches and tables. There were many objects suggesting a doctor theme, such as a toy stethescope, bandaid box, syringe, medicine bottles, and cotton. Other objects not specific to the doctor theme were also available, such as several pieces of fabric, hats, blocks, some pieces of styrofoam and two dolls (a baby doll and a dog).

The sessions were videotaped from the next room. Each session was 20-30 minutes in length from the time the children entered the room. The data used in this analysis consist of the first 16 minutes after the adult left.

Analyses. The utterances were transcribed with notes about context by an experimenter who had been present at the taping. Immediate self-repetition was

not counted or coded as a separate utterance. The utterances were coded using the transcripts while viewing the tape. The coding system represented a continuum from utterances that were least like pretend play to those that were enactment of pretending. The coding categories are shown in Table 1.

Each dyad was analyzed by two coders. One coded all utterances from 16 minutes and the other coded a 4-minute sample to provide a reliability assessment. The reliability of coding was .87.

The statistical analysis reported in this paper are based on t-tests of the means of two age groups, 24-47 months and 48-64 months. All analyses were performed on dyad data rather than individual children's data.

Results and Discussion

Pretending. Looking at 2- to 5-year old preschoolers as a group, we find that half of their utterances in this situation were coded as part of pretend play (see Table 2). This result is consistent with other studies of pretend play in similar situations that have measured the amount of time, rather than number of utterances, devoted to pretending (e.g., Matthews, 1977, 1978). Most dyads began pretend play within the first few utterances, drawing upon a preestablished schema for doctor play. Here is an example from two girls, MO (age 64 months) and MI (61 months), who went straight to the doctor's kit upon entering the room, and explicitly mentioned the theme of the play:

(1) MI: What's this?[indicating blood pressure gauge]

MO: Wanna play doctor?

MI: Well, yeah. Pretend we were both [....

MO: [doctors.

MI: Yeah

MO: ( )

MI: ( ) Will you be the patient for a few minutes:

MO: Um ok. Then, but then we'll both gonna be doctors.

MI: Yeah.

There were no sex differences in the analyses carried out.

Analyzing the data for the effect of the age of the children, we find that older dyads produced more utterances in the 16 minute period ($t = 2.47$, $p < .05$). Pretending also increased with age independently of the number of utterances produced ($t = 2.48$, $p < .05$), as shown in Table 2 under the columns "younger" and "older" children. This result is consistent with findings of studies of the amount of time spent in fantasy play in this age range (Rubin, Watson, & Jambor, 1978; Sanders & Harper, 1978). The biggest change occurred within the 2-year-olds, with early 2's producing almost no utterances coded as pretending in this dyadic situation.

Planning and enactment. As shown in Table 3 under "all children," of the utterances that were coded as part of pretend sequences, over half were devoted to planning and management of play functions (Categories C1 & C2) such as role assignment, description of the child's own actions, directives to the other child, and object descriptions or transformations. A smaller proportion (.23) were enactments, or talking for the character being portrayed (Categories C4 and C5). There was no reliable difference between younger and older children in the proportion of utterances devoted to planning or to enactment, according to a t-test between younger and older children (see Table 3). Even the late 2-year-olds used their utterances to plan and regulate their play. Example (2) shows a sequence in which both children's utterances were coded as planning. BO's (30 months) self-description of her actions provides the format for LY's (32 months) actions and copied self-description.

(2) BO: I'm bringing doggie for a ride with me. [puts on beret and takes dog]

LY: I'm gonna bring my (doll) - dolly for ride with me. Dolly for a ride. Dolly.

BO: My doll's going for - my my my dolly goin' for a ride with me. [picks up dog]

LY: (Ride, um -) and my dolly's goes ride for me. [picks up doll]

In example (3), the children disagree about the activity rather than cooperate. Their language serves as an attempt, though unsuccessful, to resolve the conflict. BO is pretending to hear LY's heartbeat (the toy stethescope does not actually transmit the sound) but it is not clear whether LY's unwillingness is part of the play or based on real fear of being hurt by the stethescope:

(3) BO: [puts on toy stethescope and "listens" to L's heart]

LY: No.

BO: Want your heartbeat?

NY: No.

BO: Why?

LY: Cause I might get a boo-boo.

BO: Cotton. [context unclear] Why? ["listens" again] I hear your heart beatin'. Did you like it? You like it? Can I do it now?

LY: [tries to take stethescope] I do it.

BO: I wanna do it.

In another late two-year-old dyad, there were no mutual pretend planning sequences. Instead, one child attempted several times to move the play into the pretend realm, but the other child did not follow, as in the following example from these two boys, RO (36 months) and NA (33 months):

(4) RO: Doctor? Doctor. Les - Let's sit down. [lies on couch]

NA: (We can't.)

RO: ( ) Yeah. Let's go (sleep).

NA: It's not a bed.

Although even young children engaged in some planning, we would not want to suggest that the qualitative aspects of planning remain constant over these years. Analyses are in progress currently to explore the possible changes in the type of planning carried out. For example, one characteristic of older children's play seems to be the emergence of problem elements that serve as the focus for the play. Contrast the following example of planning in a pretend sequence from two girls, both 54 months, with example (2) above:

(5) LA: LA: My baby's so sick, my baby (doll). We gotta [( )
JE: [That's the same thing with my baby.
LA: I have something different ( )
JE: [Mine is sicker a lot.
LA: Mine's pneumonia.
JE: Yours is pneumonia sick, you mean?
LA: Uh huh. Bring her to the hospital. [takes doll over to couch]

Here, there is also repetition by JE of the theme that LA introduced, but repetition with elaboration. By establishing a more serious problem, LA quite effectively manages to remain dominant in the play, to have her doll be the focus of attention, and to coordinate her play partners activities with hers rather than allowing JE to simply play a parallel game.

When the children pretended, they also carried out their roles in play enactments from an early age, though the proportion of such speech is not large (see Table 3). Our observations suggest that even quite young children vary their utterances to suit the sex, status and social intent of the role being portrayed, using speech that can be identified as doctor, mother, baby, and so on. Further analysis of the enactment utterances will focus on how the children mark their speech in roles so as to indicate that it is pretending.

In the situation observed here, preschool children engaged in a considerable amount of pretend play, with pretend more likely for older than for younger children. A dramatic change occurred between the 2-year-olds and 3-year-olds in amount of pretending. When the children were pretending, at all ages, they used their language both for planning behavior and role enactments. Even late two-year-olds managed to use their limited linguistic resources to aid in coordinating their play activities.

Footnotes

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Table 1. Coding Categories

A.	Nonplay.	Literal reference to objects, events, feelings. Oh, there's a microphone I hafta go to the bathroom Why'd she leave?
B.	Non-pretend play.	Using objects but not in pretending or in role-appropriate way--exploring environment--verbal and non-verbal behavior do not suggest imitation of stereotypic speech or behaviors associated with role. Oh, that's for the doctor's stuff This is probably water (re small bottle)
C.	Pretend play.	Utterances within sequence of utterances or behaviors showing role-appropriate or non-literal use of objects--behavior suggests imitation of behaviors associated with role. These utterances will be coded on a continuum representing whether the utterance seems to be spoken by the child as "self" or "in a role." 1. Planning. Child speaks as self within role sequence to plan or manage the play. For example, assignment of roles (I'll be the doctor) or statements about the activities (Pretend...) would clearly be coded as 1. 2. Planning. Probably spoken as self but could possibly be realization (I'm the doctor) 3. Could be planning or enactment. For example, a statement about an action to follow (Now I'm gonna put this thing on you) or a description of a pretend state (She has a boo-boo) would be coded as 3. 4. Enactment. Probably in the role but not explicitly marked. For example, an utterance that is stereotypic of the role but could also be meant literally (This won't hurt you) would be coded as 4. 5. Enactment. Child realizes role in utterance. These may be not explicitly marked but stereotypic of the role (Now this won't hurt a bit) or appropriate only to the role in terms of content (I shot a big lion). They also may be explicitly marked as role-taking speech. Explicit markings are, for example, refering to the speaker's role (Baby says "I'm hurt "), a change in pitch or tone of voice, or mention of the listener's role name (Mommy, I don't need that).

Table 2. Proportion of all utterances categorized according to whether Pretend or not.

	All children	Younger children	Older children
Pretend	.50	.35	.62
Not pretend	.50	.65	.38

Table 3. Proportion of Pretend utterances categorized as Planning or Enactment.

	All children	Younger children	Older children
Planning	.57	.46	.65
Enactment	.23	.30	.17